

The Outing of Philip Morris: Advertising Tobacco to Gay Men

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Numerous studies suggest that gay men have higher smoking prevalence rates than the population as a whole.^{1–3} Why gay men are likelier to smoke has not been established. Hypotheses include the stresses of coming out and identity formation, depression, antigay victimization,² and a desire to fit into a subculture traditionally formed around gay bars, where both drinking and smoking are the norm.⁴ Little previous work has explored tobacco industry influences on the gay community.

Just as it has approached other minorities,^{5–7(p336)} the tobacco industry has advertised in gay media,⁸ sponsored gay community events,⁹ and contributed to gay and AIDS organizations.^{10,11} The normalizing effects of the tobacco industry's presence in the community may contribute to a higher smoking prevalence¹² and predispose the community to view the industry positively, support industry policy positions, and discourage tobacco control measures.¹³ Advertising may have particular salience in the gay community, where it represents social validation.¹⁴

This study used internal tobacco industry documents and secondary historical media sources to explore the origin and reception of the first tobacco advertising in the gay press. As a “first,” the campaign and events surrounding it generated discussion at the company and in the press. This historical analysis shows how the tobacco industry's approach to the gay community differs from its approach to racial minorities and suggests that tobacco control advocates have an opportunity to intervene before the relationship between the industry and the gay community becomes fully developed.

METHODS

Data were collected from the Philip Morris Incorporated document Web site (<http://www.pmdocs.com/>), which provides access to millions of company documents released as a

Objectives. This case study describes the events surrounding the first time a major tobacco company advertised in gay media.

Methods. We analyzed internal tobacco company documents, mainstream newspapers, and the gay press.

Results. Philip Morris was unprepared for the attention its entry into the gay market received. The company's reaction to this incident demonstrates that its approach to the gay community both parallels and diverges from industry strategies toward other marginalized communities.

Conclusions. The tobacco industry's relationship to the gay community is relatively undeveloped, a fact that may provide tobacco control advocates an opportunity for early intervention. The gay community's particular vulnerabilities to the industry make development of gay tobacco control programs crucial to reducing gay smoking prevalence and industry presence in the community. (*Am J Public Health.* 2003;93:988–993)

result of the multistate attorneys general settlements and other cases. Between June 1, 2001, and October 1, 2001, we searched the Philip Morris Web site for documents pertaining to the industry's relationship with the gay community. We used a variety of search terms, including *gay*, *homosexual*, *queer*, and names of gay publications. We extended the searches by using names of individuals, dates, and other indexing information, in a “snowball” search strategy. Further information on document collection and searching strategies was provided previously.¹⁵ In addition, major national newspapers and the lesbian and gay press were reviewed for the relevant period. This case study is based on review of 70 industry documents, Lexis/Nexis searches of more than 50 major newspapers, and examination of 13 lesbian and gay periodicals.

Advertising and the Gay Press

The gay press in the United States emerged in the 1950s, but it was not until the 1990s that national-circulation gay men's periodicals that appealed to mainstream advertisers were established.^{16–18} One of these was *Genre*, established in 1991, which was less political and more focused on fashion and “lifestyle” than the previous generation of gay periodicals.¹⁹ At the same time, gay marketing firms, using dubious data,²⁰ were “pitching” the

community to advertisers by claiming that gay households had an average income up to two thirds higher than the national average.^{21,22} Gay men also were reputed to have high levels of brand loyalty to companies that advertised directly to them.²³ “This is a dream market,” one gay marketer said.²²

Philip Morris Enters the Gay Market

The combination of gay self-promotion, the availability of appropriate periodicals, the increasing public awareness and acceptance of the gay community, and the desire for larger markets tempted Philip Morris to enter the market. By early 1992, Leo Burnett, Philip Morris's advertising agency, was urging the company to include the gay press in a larger campaign promoting a Benson & Hedges brand extension.²⁴ (A brand extension is a variation, such as low tar, king size, or soft pack, of an established brand.) A Leo Burnett media supervisor told Philip Morris that the gay community was “an area of opportunity for the brand.” As “one of the first (if not the first) tobacco advertiser[s],” Philip Morris could “‘own the market’ and achieve exclusivity.”²⁴ Leo Burnett also suggested being “cautious . . . since this is . . . a brand launch” (i.e., a new product), and “the number of viable gay [publications] is limited.” On Leo Burnett's recommendation, Philip

Morris bought space in the October/November 1992 and December/January 1993 issues of *Genre*.²⁵

Philip Morris did not expect the *Genre* advertisements to attract attention. The advertisements had no gay-specific content, and the company did not publicize them, aiming instead for a business-oriented story about how the advertising campaign would revitalize the Benson & Hedges brand. Philip Morris gave the story exclusively to Stuart Elliott, a business reporter for the *New York Times*.²⁶ Although Elliott was openly gay and was interested in gay marketing efforts,²¹ the Philip Morris brand manager's notes²⁷ and Elliott's article²⁸ suggest that Elliott was willing to frame the story as an introduction of the brand to the business community, with no gay angle. However, the exclusive arrangement, designed to help Philip Morris control the press coverage, had the opposite effect.

The Outing of Philip Morris

Don Tuthill, the publisher of *Genre*, "outed" Philip Morris. Tuthill was thrilled to land the Philip Morris account. To publicize his accomplishment, he contacted Joanne Lipman, the advertising columnist at the *Wall Street Journal*. When Lipman asked Philip Morris to comment on its *Genre* advertising, company spokespeople declined because of the exclusive arrangement with the *Times*. "Needless to say," Philip Morris documents report, "she [Lipman] was not happy." Lipman's resulting story in the *Wall Street Journal*, headlined "Philip Morris to Push Brand in Gay Media,"²⁹ was, according to Philip Morris, "nasty headlined with a damaging tone that could have . . . reposition[ed] the brand."²⁶

Lipman's story was picked up widely in the national media. Versions appeared in at least 7 big-city daily papers and on national and local television and radio news across the country.³⁰⁻⁴⁹ This story had several elements that probably displeased Philip Morris. First, some reporters implicitly contrasted the masculine Marlboro Man with presumably effeminate gay men. The *Wall Street Journal* characterized the advertisements as "unprecedented for . . . Philip Morris, the very company behind the macho Marlboro Man."²⁹ NBC-TV commented that "when Philip Morris created

a macho Marlboro Man, the gay man was probably not what [it] had in mind, but he is now."⁴² The *New York Post's* lead was even more jocular: "Don't look now, Marlboro Man—but you've got a brand-new gay partner."³⁴ *All Things Considered* treated this aspect seriously, discussing the Marlboro Man's popularity among gay men.⁴⁰

Second, some reports suggested that the new product would be a "gay cigarette." Fox News in New York asked, "Well, just when you thought you had heard it all, how about a cigarette manufactured specifically for gays?"⁴⁴ The *New York Post's* headline screamed, "New cigs aimed at gay smokers."³⁴ Most of the stories were more nuanced, claiming that the cigarette would be "targeted" to the gay community.^{36,39-42,44} Some reports mentioned targeting only in Philip Morris's denial—for example, "Philip Morris denies that it is targeting any specific consumer group."^{31,47,48,50}

Probably most troubling from Philip Morris's point of view, many reports brought up R.J. Reynolds' Uptown fiasco.^{31,33,34,44,49} In 1989, when R.J. Reynolds' plans to market a new, high-nicotine brand called Uptown to African Americans were revealed, African American community health activists, including US Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan, reacted with outrage. R.J. Reynolds dropped the brand.⁵¹ Philip Morris could hardly have been happy to have this story rehashed in connection with its product launch.

The accusation of targeting was not entirely accurate. The impetus for advertising in *Genre* came from the advertising agency.^{24,25} The agency, in turn, had been actively wooed by *Genre*.^{30,52} Philip Morris had not been especially eager. Senior Vice President of Marketing David Dangoor said that there were "long discussions up the line" about the decision. Despite these reservations, Philip Morris ultimately decided that taking this "measured risk" was "the right thing to do."⁵³ Philip Morris apparently did no market research in the gay community before placing these advertisements, although it recognized some of the market's distinctive qualities. In 1993 the Benson & Hedges budget was slashed, but advertisements remained in *Out* and *Genre* because the space had already

been purchased and was "unsuitable for other brand usage."⁵⁴

Philip Morris took pains to emphasize that it was *not* targeting gays. The notes prepared for Michael A. Miles, chairman and chief executive officer of Philip Morris Companies Inc to use at the 1993 shareholders' meeting, suggested that he respond to questions with, "We did not develop separate advertising, nor did we attempt to position the brand specifically for gays."⁵⁵ Some gay men found this to be an effective defense. Elliott, the *Times* reporter, remarked, "It's not as though you did a special ad with two hunky guys who [had] just had sex with cigarettes in their mouths."⁵⁶

Little evidence exists of how the story impressed the public. No visible response resembling the anti-Uptown campaigns came from either the gay community or tobacco control advocates. We could locate no newspaper articles or company documents that suggest that the exposure damaged the reputations or market share of the brand or company.

Gay Reaction

Gay leaders had a variety of reactions to the advertisements. Jerry Williams, the associate publisher of the weekly *Gay Chicago*, felt that the advertisements meant that "barriers are beginning to fall. It says 'we respect you as consumers and we want your business.'" He said he would "gladly" accept tobacco advertisements.³⁷ *Genre's* Tuthill was ecstatic. "I'm just celebrating being part of the mix," he said. "We're not being excluded any longer."³⁰ Tuthill strongly objected to the angle of the *Wall Street Journal's* story, which he said described "the tobacco industry . . . turning its marketing muscle on another minority." The real story, he asserted, was one of "inclusion" and of "how a conservative American company fights discrimination against homosexuals by putting its money where its mouth is."⁵⁷

Others were more ambivalent. *The Advocate's* editor, Jeff Yarbrough, remarked that it was difficult for gay publications to turn down advertisements because they were still "in a beggar's position, rather than a chooser's position."⁴⁰ The publisher of Chicago's *Outlines* newsmagazine said that she "might accept a cigarette ad, but balance it with equal

space for a public-service message on cancer risks.”³⁷ Another Chicago publisher of a gay periodical said that accepting cigarette advertisements “could damage [his] publication’s image.” He added, “To me, cigarettes kill.”³⁷ Hal Offen, a spokesman from the Coalition of Lavender Americans on Smoking and Health—possibly the only gay tobacco control group then in existence—said, “This is a community already ravaged by addiction. We don’t need the Marlboro Man to help pull the trigger.”^{58,59} A Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund spokeswoman said, “I don’t see how this can be construed as any kind of victory for gay rights.”³⁴

Philip Morris’s internal account of the gay reaction appears flattering to the company but is not entirely convincing. A media relations brief recounted that Philip Morris had “fielded a variety of calls from the gay community. . . . All callers viewed [Philip Morris’ advertising] as a very positive step.”⁶⁰ The appreciative feedback is plausible, given the response of Tuthill and Williams and the eagerness of some segments of the gay community for commercial recognition. The company also claimed that it “saw a lot of good stories come out of the gay media praising Philip Morris.”²⁶ This claim is not confirmed by a review of the gay press. Of 13 gay papers from across the country, only 4 had any cov-

erage of the incident. The *San Francisco Bay Times* and the *San Francisco Sentinel* both quoted Offen. The *San Francisco Bay Times* headlined its story “Queers to Philip Morris: Drop Dead.”^{58,59} Two papers in Chicago also briefly covered the story.^{61,62} The *Windy City Times* was the most industry-favorable, quoting Philip Morris’s denial that it was “targeting” gays and mentioning market research about Benson & Hedges’ popularity among gay men.⁶² None of these stories praised Philip Morris.

Damage Control

Philip Morris’s response to the media included 3 well-established techniques for coping with protests from racial minorities: deny, attack, and co-opt. In contrast to the company’s usual emphasis on its close relationship with the community in question, however, Philip Morris chose to distance itself from the gay community (Table 1). As Philip Morris outlined them a few years later, the first key points to make “re: targeting minority[ies]” are that “Philip Morris does NOT target specific groups in society” (deny) and that “Anyone who believes that members of minority groups are more influenced by ads than [other] people is really saying that [they] are not as capable of making rational informed choices as other adults” (attack).⁶³

Philip Morris made similar remarks to the media in regard to the *Genre* advertisements. The industry has frequently paid apparently independent spokespeople and front groups to represent it (co-opt), and Philip Morris made donations⁶⁸ and referred reporters who called about the *Genre* story to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).⁶⁹

Philip Morris had additional responses to minority group protests in its arsenal; these went unused. For example, the company liked to remind people that it had long supported the African American community by advertising in that community’s publications, using African American models, hiring and promoting African Americans, and supporting institutions such as the United Negro College Fund and others “working for [civil] rights and equal opportunity because it is the right thing to do, not because of any ulterior motives.”⁶³ Philip Morris could not have invoked any such long-standing relationship with or support for the gay community because little such support existed. In 1991, Philip Morris agreed to donate \$1 200 000 to AIDS groups.^{70–72} The company could have used this donation as evidence of its support of the gay community. It also could have mentioned its financial contributions to GLAAD.⁶⁸

TABLE 1—Philip Morris’s Damage Control Strategies: African American Community and Gay Community

Strategy	African American Community	Gay Community
Deny targeting specific communities	“Philip Morris does NOT target specific groups in society.” ⁶³	“We market all of our products to adult smokers, and we don’t discriminate. Adult smokers includes both genders, all races and sexual preferences.” ³²
Attack accusers	“Underlying the charge that . . . minorities make easy targets for marketing is the chauvinistic belief that they are incapable of making informed personal decisions for themselves.” ⁶⁴	“People who have a problem with” Philip Morris’s advertising in <i>Genre</i> “should really question their own levels of bigotry.” ⁶⁵
Co-opt individuals or organizations	“Dr. Benjamin Hooks, former executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said ‘critics of tobacco marketing efforts believe women and blacks are not capable of making their own free choice.’” ⁶⁴	GLAAD “has been very effective in facilitating [the] transition” of the [<i>Genre</i>] story toward “inclusion.” ⁶⁶
Emphasize ties to the community	“The question shouldn’t be ‘why is PM advertising in the minority community?’ but rather, ‘where are the other major companies?’ . . . PM cares enough to compete for minority business.” ⁶³	
Distance the company from the community		“We have no plans to advertise Benson & Hedges Special Kings—or any of our other cigarette brands—in any other supposedly homosexual publications.” ⁶⁷

Note. PM = Philip Morris. GLAAD = Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Instead, Philip Morris spokeswoman Karen Daragan emphasized that the *Genre* advertisements were an insignificant part of the larger Benson & Hedges marketing plan, saying that the advertisements would appear in “nearly 60 other magazines” besides *Genre*.³⁰ The “nearly 60” figure was designed to underscore Daragan’s assertion that Philip Morris marketed to all adults. Daragan also specifically mentioned *Playboy* and *Penthouse* as examples,³⁰ emphasizing the “heterosexuality” of the cigarette and the advertisements.

Philip Morris was especially eager to avoid any connections to gay sexuality, declining to advertise in *The Advocate* because that publication contained “sexually explicit ads.”²⁵ At the shareholder meeting, Miles was coached to assure his audience that *Genre* “does not carry personal ads or ads for explicitly sexual products.”⁵⁵ One gay publisher characterized this policy as “homophobia. They don’t care about phone-sex ads in *Playboy*.”³⁷ The company disavowed any knowledge of the gay community, telling 1 shareholder that it had “no marketing data specific to the ‘homosexual market’—if such a market even exists.”⁷³

Denial, attack, and co-option are strategies the company used specifically to respond to accusations of target marketing. Another strategy the company used in a variety of contexts to control the flow of information was concealment. In this case, the company refused to provide a picture of the new brand or its advertising.⁶⁴ Thus, the story became one about “gay cigarettes,” not Benson & Hedges.

Philip Morris’s management was pleased with the company’s recovery from the unwanted press coverage. Five days after the *Wall Street Journal* story, spokeswoman Daragan remarked that “the news has moved on to the much broader issue of ‘inclusion’ and does not mention the new cigarette by name.”⁶⁹ And by early September, Senior Vice President of Marketing Dangoor concluded that the “Corporate Affairs Department did an excellent job with ‘damage control.’” The initial *Wall Street Journal* article, Dangoor said, was “very unfortunate and ‘unfair’”—but again, the brand was not strongly associated with the story, and “the reporting got fairer with time.”⁵³

DISCUSSION

One lesson from the *Genre* incident is that tobacco control activists should disrupt the industry’s tactic of concealment. Philip Morris was pleased that no pictures of the new product or its advertising reached the public and that the association between the “gay targeting” story and the new cigarette was lost. Keeping the focus on Benson & Hedges, ideally in such a way as to threaten its image or sales, might have been effective. A new product is likely the most vulnerable to any kind of negative publicity, as the Uptown episode demonstrated; activists should monitor business and advertising media closely to anticipate such introductions.

The *Genre* story also suggests that timing is a key aspect of combating concealment. Tuthill’s press release came out a month before the advertisements were in print, so health advocates had time to respond. Advocates could have spent that month developing their own campaign designed for release when the advertisements appeared.

Advocates should be ready to capitalize on any attention to the tobacco industry. In this instance, Philip Morris was getting press it did not initiate with an angle that was unexpected, and an opportunity arose to build on the story. On August 15, 1992, a day after the *Genre* story broke, Doctors Ought to Care, a tobacco control advocacy group of physicians and medical students, released a batch of Philip Morris documents that focused on the company’s donations to minority organizations,⁷⁴ but no link was made to the previous day’s story. Doctors Ought to Care or other tobacco control activists could have made that link and potentially extended the life of both stories, as well as facilitating alliances among marginalized groups. The desire for acceptance that makes the gay community vulnerable to tobacco advertising also makes it eager to be regarded as a legitimate minority, and this opportunity could have been used to build tobacco control alliances.

The *Genre* episode also illustrates the complexity of the industry’s relationships with marginalized groups. With its advertisements in *Genre*, Philip Morris was entering a lucrative new market and establishing new alliances with little investment. By not develop-

ing any gay-specific products or campaigns, Philip Morris protected itself both financially and socially. The company’s only expense was for the advertisement itself, and when it was outed, the generic nature of the advertisement made the distancing strategy plausible. At the same time, by establishing itself in the vanguard of companies willing to market to gays, Philip Morris stood to gain valuable brand loyalty.

However, *Genre* was not simply waiting for Philip Morris. *The Advocate*’s Yarbrough pointed out that the gay media were beggars, not choosers, but even beggars act on their own behalf. Simply castigating Philip Morris for “targeting” ignores the publisher’s decision to actively seek tobacco advertising. Tuthill did not see himself as a victim of a predatory industry; rather, he believed that he had elevated the status of the gay community by gaining support from a major corporation. Nor was Tuthill unique. As gay publications such as *Genre* became mainstream, they were more likely to get tobacco advertising and to become dependent on the revenue once they had it, and they were less likely to develop a critique of any advertiser, including the tobacco industry.¹⁸ It was no accident that Philip Morris chose this moment to enter the gay market—and no coincidence that it was welcomed.

Thus, the relationship between Philip Morris and Tuthill was a negotiation, though not one between equals. Tuthill was eager for the company’s money, but Philip Morris was reluctant to be identified with gay men. And *Genre* was struggling for social acceptance and financial success, whereas the company was hungry for new markets.

This complex of factors means that public health would be well served by the development of an active gay and lesbian tobacco control movement. Objections from outsiders could be dismissed as attempts to keep gay periodicals and the gay community marginal. Health advocates would be unpersuasive if they addressed Tuthill and his ilk as mere victims, rather than acknowledging their agency. Thus, the most effective efforts would come from within the gay community, from those who share the same status and face the same choices as those accepting or courting industry support.

The time to formulate this response is now, while the relationship between the industry and the gay community is still relatively young. The contrast with the African American community makes the developmental stage of this relationship clear. Philip Morris, now The Altria Group,⁷⁵ was, and apparently still is, reluctant to identify or even be associated with the gay community. For instance, it does not publicize its contributions to gay (as opposed to AIDS) organizations such as GLAAD on its Web site (<http://www.altria.com>). The tobacco industry advertises to the gay community, but unlike other mainstream advertisers, it has yet to develop overtly gay-specific campaigns. The cigarette advertisements in gay magazines do not feature gay couples or symbols. Furthermore, these advertisements do not appear to be the primary support of gay periodicals. Few gay organizations are as publicly linked to the industry as GLAAD. These factors suggest that industry links to the gay community are still relatively weak, so advocates could intercede before community dependence on tobacco money becomes widespread and while public skepticism about the industry is still high.

Gay and lesbian tobacco control activists have already developed guidelines to help community organizations make the choice not to accept tobacco money.^{76,77} These efforts should be nurtured by funding agencies, which could make community-level interventions a priority. Such programs should encourage activists to monitor and challenge tobacco industry support for gay media and organizations. These programs also should forge connections with tobacco control activism in other communities, and with other health activism in the gay community, such as that surrounding AIDS. The *Genre* story represents an opportunity lost, but it provides useful lessons for tobacco control in the gay community and other marginalized communities just beginning to come to the attention of the tobacco industry. ■

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